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## Rise of Catholic Schools in the Global South and Implications for University Research

Quentin Wodon<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Building on a presentation made at the closing plenary of OIEC's World Congress in New York, this paper considers two trends affecting Catholic education globally and their potential implications for university research and programs in support of K12 schools. The first trend is the shift of enrollment in K12 Catholic education towards the global south and especially Africa in terms of the sheer number of students enrolled in schools. The second trend relates to the deepening learning crisis in K12 education affecting much of the developing world, and again especially Africa. These two trends have implications for university research and programs in support of K12 Catholic schools on the continent. The paper argues that apart from discussions related to Catholic identity, which are of course important, more attention should be placed by universities, including in the West, on the related but distinct issue of how to improve basic learning for students enrolled in K12 Catholic schools in the global south.

Catholic universities play an important role in K12 education, including in the global south. Globally, many of the teachers in K12 Catholic schools are trained in Catholic universities that manage a range of programs for this purpose (see for example Ozar et al. (2014) for the United States). Through research or advisory functions, scholars in Catholic universities in Schools of Theology, Schools of Education, and other schools also play a role directly or indirectly in helping K12 schools maintain and strengthen their Catholic identity. The emphasis placed by scholars of Catholic education on what makes a school Catholic is logical. It is evident in many of the articles published in Catholic-focused education journals such as the *Journal of Catholic Education* and

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*International Studies in Catholic Education*. It is also evident in the essays assembled in the landmark collection by Grace & O’Keefe (2007) for their *International Handbook on Catholic Education*. Yet although the concern for and emphasis on the Catholic identity of schools is global, much of the scholarly work published in leading international journals tends to focus on Western countries. This could be because the perceived threat of secularization for the identity of Catholic schools may be stronger in Western countries. But it probably also reflects the fact that Western countries have a higher density of well-trained scholars who have both the ability and incentives to publish in leading (Western) academic journals.

Unfortunately, the emphasis placed on issues related to the Catholic identity of schools may not be sufficient to help the schools confront the challenges they face to equip their students with the skills and education they need. This paper is built on a presentation made at the closing plenary at the United Nations of the OIEC Congress held in New York in June 2019 (part of the presentation focused on the global south, but some elements also focused on Western countries, and especially the United States, as discussed in a separate article included in this symposium). The paper has a simple message that may appear slightly controversial to some readers: research on Catholic schools must go well beyond questions of identity. Given how the landscape of Catholic education is rapidly changing, with an ever larger share of students in K12 Catholic schools located in the global south and especially Africa, and given the difficulty for schools in the global south to ensure basic proficiency in secular subjects for their students, there is a risk that too much emphasis given to issues of Catholic identity in university-based research on K12 Catholic education leads to not tackling other pressing challenges related to the quality of the education being provided. This is not to say that issues of identity do not matter, but rather than beyond these issues, serious work of a different nature is also needed.

Apart from current areas of scholarly focus in Catholic education, Catholic scholars and universities—those located in the global south, but also those located in the West, need to invest in research that could improve schooling and learning in developing countries, and especially in Africa, since this is the continent where a majority of students in K12 Catholic schools will soon reside. To make this point, the paper considers two basic trends affecting Catholic education globally. The first is the shift of Catholic education towards the global south—and specifically Africa, in terms of the sheer number of students enrolled in Catholic schools. The second relates to the learning crisis affecting Catholic and other schools in much of the developing world, and again most acutely in Africa. These trends cannot be ignored. They have implications for university research and programs in support of K12 Catholic schools. Section 2 of the paper describes the trends affecting Catholic education globally. Section 3 discusses some of their implications for university research and support to K12 schools. A brief conclusion follows.

## Two Trends Affecting Catholic Schools

### Rise of the Global South and Africa in K12 Education

The first trend affecting Catholic schools globally is the fundamental shift over time in where students enrolled in Catholic schools live. This is best illustrated with data on enrollment available for virtually all countries in the Catholic Church's annual statistical yearbooks.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 shows trends in enrollment for nurseries and preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools, as well as total enrollment from 1980 to 2016, the latest year for which data are available (Secretaria Status, 2018).

In 2016, 7.3 million children were enrolled in Catholic nurseries and preschools, 35.1 million in primary schools, and 20.0 million in secondary schools. For all three levels combined, enrollment increased from 34.6 million to 62.5 million children, echoing to a large extent the effect of population growth (Wodon, 2018). What is striking though is that the Africa region accounted for three fourths (74.2 percent) of the total increase in enrollment, with the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools in the region jumping from 6.6 million to 27.3 children. The region with the largest gains after Africa was Asia, in particular due to gains in South Asia. In 1980, the Americas and Europe had the largest enrollment in Catholic schools. By 2016, they ranked third and fourth in total enrollment behind Africa and Asia. If the Americas were split between North America and Central and South America plus the Caribbean, the shift from the developed to the developing world would be even more dramatic.

This trend towards an increasing concentration of students in Catholic schools in the global south is expected to continue for some time (Wodon, 2019b). In several Western countries, and especially in the United States, enrollment in Catholic schools has been declining over the last 30 years. In the global south and especially in Africa, it is expected to continue to increase, especially at the secondary level as students who complete primary school thanks in part to the success of the Education for All initiative now enroll in secondary school. At the tertiary level, enrollment in Catholic institutions of higher learning is still dominated by developed countries, but this will also change at some point as tertiary education grows in the global south, including in Africa even if this is with a lag.

### Learning Crisis in K12 Education in the Global South

The second trend may be even more fundamental than the first. It relates to the deepening learning crisis affecting much of the developing world, and especially Africa, as well as the changing

<sup>1</sup> The data are self-reported by the chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions that fill the annual questionnaire. In a typical year, only about five percent of jurisdictions do not fill the questionnaire, and this is often the case for small jurisdictions. In some countries that are especially large or complex, estimates might not be very precise, and some could be on the low side. For India for example, data provided by Manipadam (2018) suggest that the estimates in the statistical yearbook may be too low.

**Table 1***Trends in the Number of Students Enrolled in K12 Catholic Schools (Thousands)*

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2016
Nurseries and Preschools					
Africa	162.4	484.6	1,147.9	1,277.5	2,194.9
Americas	514.0	968.7	1,331.1	1,409.6	1,379.1
Asia	607.0	1,058.6	1,369.8	1,761.1	1,841.3
Europe	1,634.4	1,845.1	1,681.0	1,923.4	1,835.1
Oceania	7.6	33.5	37.1	107.0	63.0
<b>World</b>	2,925.4	4,390.5	5,566.8	6,478.6	7,313.4
Primary Schools					
Africa	5,610.7	8,393.8	10,158.4	15,821.3	19,174.4
Americas	6,838.6	7,380.6	7,554.7	6,766.0	6,285.6
Asia	3,752.6	4,289.9	4,668.9	5,023.8	5,967.6
Europe	3,979.0	3,569.2	3,099.4	2,846.0	2,948.5
Oceania	480.3	510.9	615.7	694.0	749.1
<b>World</b>	20,661.2	24,144.5	26,097.1	31,151.2	35,125.1
Secondary Schools					
Africa	806.5	1,275.2	2,267.1	4,540.9	5,911.7
Americas	3,364.0	3,506.0	3,797.6	3,868.1	3,979.4
Asia	3,150.9	3,982.1	4,017.4	5,292.0	6,105.2
Europe	3,436.0	3,358.3	3,593.8	3,666.4	3,590.5
Oceania	257.6	319.3	350.8	426.1	459.6
<b>World</b>	11,015.0	12,440.9	14,026.7	17,793.6	20,046.3
Total					
Africa	6,579.6	10,153.6	13,573.4	21,639.8	27,281.0
Americas	10,716.6	11,855.3	12,683.3	12,043.7	11,644.2
Asia	7,510.5	9,330.6	10,056.1	12,076.9	13,914.0
Europe	9,049.3	8,772.6	8,374.3	8,435.8	8,374.1
Oceania	745.5	863.7	1,003.6	1,227.1	1,271.6
<b>World</b>	34,601.5	40,975.9	45,690.6	55,423.4	62,484.8

Source: Compiled by the author from the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church.

nature of work—two topics explored in the most recent World Development Reports at the World Bank (2018; 2019). When considering these issues, work on the so-called ‘comparative advantage’ that Catholic schools may have over other schools, and especially public schools, seems a little less salient than suggested. There is a perception in the literature that Catholic schools may perform (slightly) better than public schools as measured through student performance on standardized tests. Note that this is a different issue from the question of whether the presence of Catholic

schools may lead to system-wide gains in student learning, as argued by West & Woessmann (2010). The perception of quality among Catholic schools is based in large part on pioneering studies for the United States, as discussed briefly in the companion paper in this symposium for developed countries Wodon (2020a). Yet while there is a debate in the literature on the magnitude of the ‘Catholic effect’, to the extent that it is present, there is also a question as to whether results from the United States or the West apply to developing countries.

There are examples of studies in developing countries suggesting that students in Catholic schools do well, but this is not always the case. On Africa, see for example (Backiny-Yetna & Wodon, 2009a, 2009b; Wodon & Ying, 2009). In Latin America, analysis by Alcott and Ortega (2014) for Venezuela and Lavado et al. (2016) for Peru suggests good performance for students in Fe y Alegría Jesuit schools, but findings for Colombia from Parra Osorio and Wodon (2014a) suggest few differences between these schools and other schools. On balance, a majority of studies do suggest positive effects which may be related to the values practiced by the schools including in terms of good school management and the selection of highly motivated teachers. At the same time, these effects are not always present nor large, and may not be sufficient to overcome the learning crisis.

The learning crisis appears to be worsening in some countries (as evidenced by results from international student assessments such as PASEC in Francophone Africa), possibly in part because of gains in enrollment. As more children in Africa go to school, education systems are overstretched, and some of the students newly in school come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, which are associated with more difficulties in achieving proficiency levels in core subjects while in school. In part because of these difficulties, and given gains in enrollment, the focus of the international community has shifted from simply ensuring access to schools to ensuring that children learn while in school. Many children remain out of school (UNICEF, 2018). But for those in school, in addition learning is insufficient.

For example, three in four students in third grade in East African countries do not understand a simple sentence, and in rural India, three in four students in that grade cannot solve a two-digit subtraction (World Bank, 2018). Another striking result is that on average, a student in a low-income country performs worse on basic literacy and numeracy than nine in ten students in high-income countries. Outcomes are only slightly better for students in many middle-income countries.

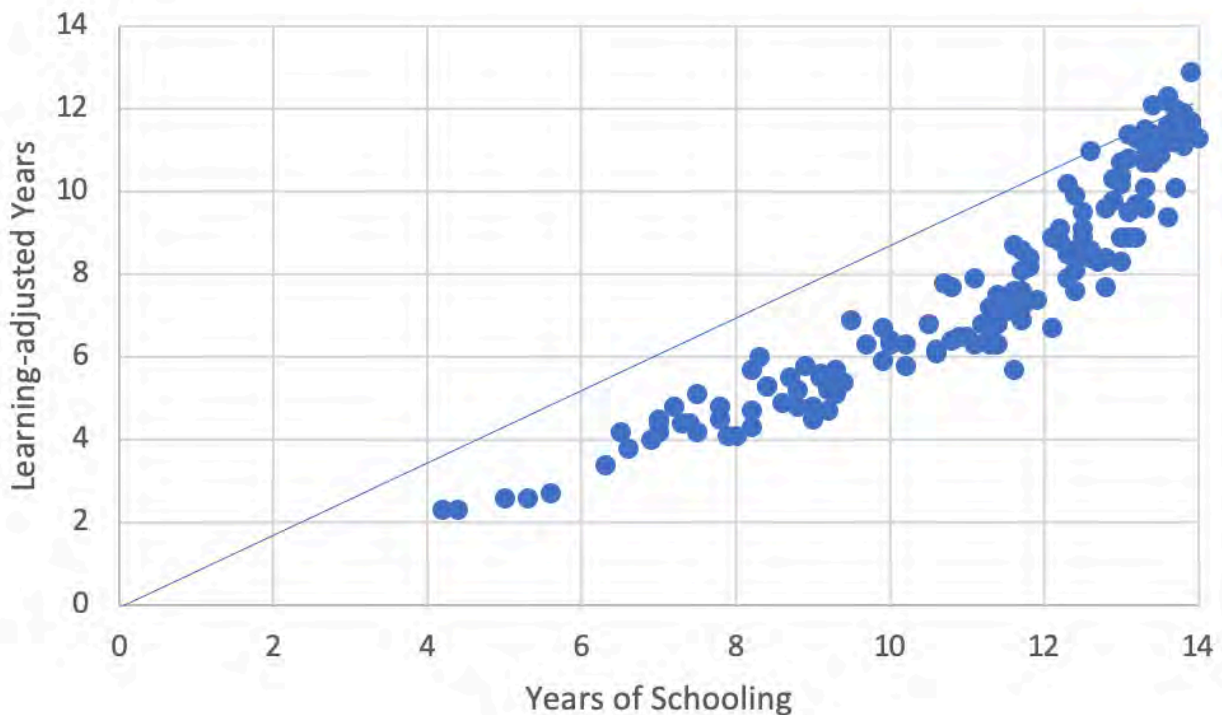
The issue is perhaps illustrated most vividly by the harmonized learning outcomes data released by the World Bank as part of its Human Capital Index in October 2018. Figure 1 provides a scatter plot for 157 countries comparing on the horizontal axis the average number of years of schooling that children in the various countries are expected to reach, and on the vertical axis the learning-adjusted years of schooling once the typical learning performance of students is accounted for. The gap between learning-adjusted years of schooling and observed years of schooling is shown by the distance between the observations on the scatter plot and the diagonal. Across all countries, without

taking the population weights of the countries into account, children are expected to complete 11.2 years of schooling, but because learning performance is low, this is only valued at 7.9 years under the harmonized learning outcome measure. In low income countries, the measures are much lower. An overwhelming majority of the countries at the bottom of harmonized learning outcomes are from sub-Saharan Africa.

Clearly, even if students in Catholic schools in Africa or more generally in the global south fare slightly better than students in other (public) schools within their country, the gaps between observed performance in developing countries and what one could expect from the number of years of education completed by children on the basis of the results in the best performing countries is so large that the Catholic effect cannot overcome that gap. In Catholic schools as in other schools in developing countries, there is an urgent need to improve learning outcomes dramatically, and the urgency is probably nowhere as strong as it is in Africa.

**Figure 1**

*Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling*



Source: Based on World Bank (2019) data.

The need to improve learning outcomes globally and especially in Africa is all the more pressing that the nature of work is changing according to the latest World Development Report (World Bank,

2019). Fears of job displacement from technology and artificial intelligence may be overstated as technology could also bring new job opportunities while also leading to smarter delivery of public services. Still, the changing nature of work has implications for the skills that workers need to acquire in school and beyond in order to become team-oriented problem-solvers who can adapt to new circumstances over time. High-order cognitive and socio-behavioral skills will be increasingly valued. Enabling workers to acquire these skills will require investments by governments to build human capital starting from an early age, especially for disadvantaged groups. In addition, as short-term work is likely to become more prevalent, governments will need to enhance safety nets so that livelihoods are not dependent only on full-time formal wage employment, which in turn has implications for revenue mobilization, but this is beyond our focus here. What is clear though is that labor markets in the developing world, including in Africa, will not be immune to the radical shifts that technology will bring, and students (future adults) will need to learn how to adapt.

### **University Research and Support to K12 Schools**

What are the implications of these two trends for university support to K12 education? Simply stated, Catholic universities—those in the global south including Africa, but also those based in the West that often have more resources at their disposal, should in their research and support to K12 schools (1) place more emphasis on the global south and especially Africa; and (2) enhance the quality of the core education provided in Catholic schools in order to prepare students for the changing labor market. Issues of Catholic identity will of course remain very important, but beyond those issues, there is also an urgent need to confront the challenge of insufficient learning in Catholic and other schools in the developing world. A few suggestions on how to do so are provided below.

#### **Focusing More on the Global South and Especially Africa**

Consider first the need to conduct research as well as support schools in the global south including Africa. This should be part of the mission not only of Catholic universities located on the continent, but also of at least some of the universities located in Western countries. The University of Notre Dame in the United States is a good example of the role that universities in developed countries can play since it recently launched a program of research on Global Catholic Education and Integral Human Development. The University's Institute for Educational Initiatives and its Kellogg Institute for International Studies held in April 2018 a workshop in Rome to discuss research and support priorities for K12 Catholic education globally. Several aspects of this work are worth noting (D'Agostino & Carozza, 2019).

The first aspect relates to the priority areas of substantive focus. Based in part on the outcomes of the workshop, the faculty has outlined three priority areas of research: (1) Comparative analysis



of education policy across countries, including in terms of the legal and regulatory frameworks and support (or lack thereof) from the state for Catholic schools; (2) Assessment of the performance or effectiveness of Catholic schools to document the existence (or lack thereof) of a "Catholic school effect" not only for student results on standardized academic tests that have tended to dominate debates on student performance (Gleeson, 2015; Kallemeyn, 2009), but also in terms of adaptability and socio-emotional skills which are becoming increasingly important as noted earlier when discussing the changing nature of work, and attitudes towards service and civil participation; and (3) Strengthening of Catholic schools' identity and distinctiveness, acknowledging that how this is expressed may well depend on context. Clearly, the issue of Catholic identity is a priority area of work, but not the only area of focus.

The second aspect relates to the process followed for the initiative and especially the emphasis on serving well identified beneficiaries beyond the academia. The objective is to conduct research in a collaborative way with researchers from the global south and especially Africa where the Congregation of the Holy Cross has a longstanding presence, with a focus on ways to build capacity for local research in countries where the growth of Catholic schools is most rapid. In addition, there is a strong desire for the initiative to also be of service to the broader Church. To achieve these objectives, the faculty at the University of Notre Dame has identified four work streams: (1) conducting pioneering research along the three priority topics mentioned earlier; (2) building research capacity among others through coaching and grants for graduate students, but also through workshops in the global south; (3) sharing knowledge and growing networks of researchers and practitioners who can pursue this work and debate in various fora, including conferences such as that of the Comparative International Education Society; and (4) serving the Church so that K12 Catholic schools can fulfill their evangelization mission, including in terms of their ability to reach students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of these principles are already at work in other initiatives from the University including its Alliance for Catholic Education which supports K12 Catholic schools in the United States and Haiti, and the Kellogg Institute's Ford Family Program in Human Development which is especially active in East Africa and South Asia.

Two additional areas of focus of this work program are worth noting. First, even though the Catholic Church maintains quite detailed records of its contribution to education systems globally as witnessed by the analysis of trends in enrollment shared earlier, there is broad recognition that data collection and monitoring remain insufficient. To confront this issue, the Congregation for Catholic Education announced at the 2015 World Congress on Catholic Education (a four-year event organized by the Office of International Education) the creation of a global Observatory for Catholic education in collaboration with various universities. This is still work in progress, but the University of Notre Dame also intends to contribute to this important initiative. Second, issues related to the legal, regulatory, and financing framework in which Catholic schools operate remain undocumented

in many developing countries, which is why this is one of the areas of focus for research identified at the University of Notre Dame. In some countries, the schools may receive virtually no support from the state, while in others they may receive support, but possibly at a cost for their identity, as illustrated by D'Agostino (2017) for Uganda. Building on work by Glenn & Groof (2012), we need to better understand the contexts in which Catholic schools operate. Tools to assess country policies towards private schools exist World Bank (2014), but they do not focus on issues faced by Catholic and more generally faith-based schools.

### **Helping All Schools Improve Learning**

The second trend mentioned earlier was the learning crisis apparently worsening in much of the developing world—and, in fact, some developed countries as well. How could Catholic universities help improve the quality of the education provided in K12 Catholic schools, and thereby student outcomes?

A first step to answer this question consists in asking what works to improve learning in general, whether students are in Catholic schools or not. In a synthesis paper based on a review of six systematic literature reviews by Conn (2014), Glewwe et al. (2014), Kremer et al. (2013), Krishnaratne et al. (2013), McEwan (2015), and Murnane & Ganimian (2014), Evans & Popova (2016) suggest—not surprisingly, that improve pedagogy in the classroom leads to the largest gains in student performance, especially when interventions adapt teaching to individual learning levels. To improve pedagogy, teacher training is required, but such training must be tailored, repeated over time, and focused on specific tasks in order to be effective. Efforts to increase accountability for teachers and principals also show promise. Catholic universities have a responsibility in those areas as do other universities, including to document what works to improve student learning, and thereby suggest better ways of teaching. Given that many of these universities train future cohorts of teachers, this research is essential to their mission.

Given that pedagogy is key, nurturing great teachers to help students succeed is a top priority. How to do this is however complex, and at times controversial. Beteille & Evans (2018) suggest five principles to recruit and support teachers: (1) Making teaching an attractive profession by improving its status, compensation policies and career progression structures; (2) Promoting meritocratic selection of teachers, followed by a probationary period, to improve the quality of the teaching force; (3) Ensuring pre-service education includes a strong practicum component to ensure teachers are well-equipped to transition and perform effectively in the classroom; (4) Providing continuous support and motivation, in the form of high-quality in-service training and strong school leadership, to allow teachers to continually improve; and (5) Using technology wisely to enhance the ability of teachers to reach every student, factoring their areas of strength and development. These principles make sense, but even though Bêteille and Evans recognize the importance of

intrinsic teacher motivation, they do not emphasize this issue very much in the guidance being provided, in part because of a limited body of evidence on what works to boost intrinsic motivation. This is perhaps a key area where Catholic universities may have a special role to play, starting with documenting practices already at work in many K12 Catholic schools.

Consider as one example of good practices already at work the case of the Fe y Alegría federation, a large network of Jesuit schools operating mostly in Latin America and aiming to reach disadvantaged children ParraOsorio & Wodon (2014a). Econometric evaluations suggest that Fe y Alegría schools tend to do well (Allcott & Ortega, 2009; Lavado et al., 2016; ParraOsorio & Wodon, 2014b) Why is this the case? According to Alcázar & Valdivia (2014), this is in part because the schools have independence in managing resources, including in terms of the selection and mentoring of teachers. Principals can test the attitude and motivation of teachers during a trial period, enabling them to select teachers who are motivated by a true sense of purpose. This sense of purpose is continuously nurtured, and teachers value the opportunity in the process to benefit from coaching by more experienced teachers who serve as mentors. Alcázar and Valdivia suggest that many of the practices adopted in Fe y Alegría schools could be replicated in public schools, including in terms of preparing so-called pedagogical projects that set clear goals and paths to achieve them. Admittedly, the issue of Catholic identity may be an important component of the intrinsic motivation of teachers in Fe y Alegría schools. But this seems less related to the specific contents of the Catholic faith than to a commitment to service, especially for disadvantaged children in Fe y Alegría schools, and an understanding of the importance of educating to fraternal humanism Congregation for Catholic Education (2017).

A key point made here is that examples of good practices in K12 Catholic schools should be better documented so that they can help inform practice not only in other Catholic schools, but also in public and private secular schools more broadly. Documenting good practices with the purpose of improving the education of all children calls for analysis that teases out the features of Catholic schools that can be adapted to other schools, as opposed to focusing mostly or solely on aspects related to Catholic identity. Globally, the share of all students enrolled in K12 Catholic schools is at 4.8 percent at the primary level and 3.5 percent at the secondary level (Wodon, 2018). The multiplier effect that university research on the features of the best K12 Catholic schools could have on other schools could be large if the focus were on finding out practices at work in those schools that are replicable, at least in principle, by all schools irrespective of their religious identity. While such research need not necessarily be conducted only in Catholic universities, it would seem natural for these universities to take the lead.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a simple discussion of two basic trends affecting K12 Catholic schools globally, and the potential implications of those trends for research and support to K12 schools by Catholic universities. Many other challenges could have been discussed – including that of the affordability of K12 Catholic schools for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (see for example Wodon, 2019a; 2020b on Africa), which in turn relates in part to the availability (or lack thereof) of state funding. But the basic message of this paper is that while discussions of Catholic identity will continue to be essential to the support that Catholic universities can provide to K12 Catholic schools, they should not be the only matter of concern. Due attention must also be given to research devoted to the urgent task of improving learning in K12 Catholic and other schools in the global south. The fact that Catholic schools often perform relatively well could be a treasure for broader education systems if university-based researchers were to tease out the practices at work in the best Catholic schools that are replicable in all schools. In the process, Catholic schools themselves would also benefit, given that even if they perform comparatively well, it is clear that they have ample room for improvements in student learning, especially in the global south.

In practice, how could researchers based in Catholic universities, not only in developing countries but also in the West, support K12 Catholic education on the continent along the lines suggested in this paper? There is no unique avenue to do so, but there are clear points of entry for such engagements. In the case of the University of Notre Dame mentioned earlier, the team conducting research on Catholic education focuses in part on East Africa as well as Latin America and some countries in South Asia because the Congregation of the Holy Cross which founded the university has strong engagement in these countries (including Kenya and Uganda in the case of East Africa). But even without such contacts, there are plenty of opportunities for collaborations. One possibility is for researchers or collaborators to contact the coordinators of the networks of K12 Catholic schools at the country level. Most of these coordinators work for the respective National Conferences of Bishops. In some countries, National Catholic Education Associations have their own formal status as nonprofits and can also serve as points of contact. The International Office of Catholic Education, which represents the Church at the United Nations in matters of education, maintains a list of contacts, as does the Congregation for Catholic Education. Another obvious point of entry are the Catholic universities located in the global south, many of which train their countries' future teachers. Researchers in those universities would benefit from collaborations with Catholic universities located in the West. Many such collaborations are already taking place, but there is scope for more sustained engagement.

The emphasis on ensuring that adequate learning takes place in schools in developing countries through proper emphasis on secular instruction in Catholic as well as other schools does not imply that character education and the transmission of the faith through the schools do not

matter. In principle, aiming for excellence in all three areas—academics, character formation and values, and faith transmission can lead to mutually reinforcing strengths. One aspect does not need to be emphasized at the cost of the other two. In practice though, trade-offs may arise, and the importance of enabling all students to achieve basic proficiency in areas such as literacy or numeracy cannot be underestimated.

To conclude, the invitation for university research and support to K12 schools suggested in the presentation made at the closing plenary of OIEC's World Congress on which this paper is based, is to focus more on the global south and especially on Africa in university research on Catholic education. There is also a need for support to K12 Catholic schools in the West, given that their market share and comparative advantage seems to be declining in some countries, as discussed in the companion paper in this symposium on these countries. But the rise of enrollment in the global south and especially in Africa and the fact that so many students are not in school or are not learning nearly enough while in school calls for stronger engagement by university scholars on those issues.

Given the aims of this paper, the analysis has remained at a general level. The aim has simply been to make scholars of religious education, many of whom work in developed countries, more aware of some of the major challenges faced by K12 Catholic schools in developing countries, and of some of the research related to improving learning in low income countries in particular. Engagement between Catholic universities and K12 schools can be transformational. There is perhaps no other place where transformational engagement to improve education is more needed than in low income countries.

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